Embryo Adoption Education Outline
Nightlight Christian Adoptions
Snowflakes® Embryo Adoption Program

The following educational components must be included as a part of home studies for couples planning to adopt through the Snowflakes program. Social workers should include a paragraph in the homestudy which states each issue that was discussed as well as the couples’ response to and understanding of each of the issues involved.

1. **Unique way to become a family. It indicates a resolution of the infertility experience.**
   a. Explore reasons for choosing embryo adoption vs. seeking a donor which incorporates one of the parents’ genetic gametes
   b. Discuss grief issues over loss of adoptive parents’ ability to have their mutually genetic child

2. **Communication**
   a. All children are curious as to how they came to be
   b. Early honesty leads to trust
   c. Need to be prepared to explain to the child the complex nature of technological conception in simple, age appropriate terms
   d. Review outline of embryo adoption ‘Lifebook’ story provided by Nightlight
   e. Read packet of articles regarding disclosure provided by Nightlight

3. **Genetic Siblings**
   a. Acknowledgement that there are other children that are genetically connected to your child
   b. Do they perceive a possible meeting as beneficial? If not, what are their concerns?

4. **Genetic Parents**
   a. Reasons for establishing contact
      - Issues of loss and resolution; creating a positive relationship; health and social communication sharing
   b. Level of comfort with contact with genetic parents
      - Explore their issues and resistance
   c. Explore preference for contact
      - Most genetic parents require notification of pregnancy and birth. Some prefer photos and letter updates throughout the child’s life. Some are open to emails, phone calls, and visits or a family reunion at some point. Some desire no contact for any reason. How would parents accommodate these different scenarios?

5. **Advantages of embryo adoption**
   a. Experience pregnancy and gestational bonding with adopted child
   b. Control over developmental gestational exposure
   c. Selection of family
   d. Multiple sibling pregnancy
   e. No finalization process required by law

6. **Disadvantages of embryo adoption**
   a. Multiple sibling pregnancy
   b. Embryos may not survive thawing process
   c. Transfers may not result in pregnancy
   d. May not successfully carry pregnancy to term

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7. Support
   a. Caring for multiples
   b. Grieving loss of embryos who do not survive thawing, implant, or are not carried to term

8. Matching & Transfer Considerations
   • Have a discussion with the adoptive family about how many children they are comfortable parenting. Is this reasonable given their home, financial situation, work schedules, ages, etc? It is important that they feel moral and legal responsibility for the embryos they adopt. These are now their unborn children and should be treated with as much care and faithfulness as a pregnancy. They should be aware of how large or small a family they want to have and then be dutiful and faithful to thaw and transfer all of the embryos that they adopt. Adoptive couples should only adopt the number of embryos that they truly feel that they will thaw and transfer and not plan to replace any embryos. They should be educated that they are adopting embryos, humans in their smallest form, unborn children, and they should be treated as such.

   • Educate the adoptive couple on the issues for the Genetic Parents (and possibly the adoptive parents’ children) when the adoptive couple does replace embryos. Genetic Parents are once again faced with the emotional stress of making a decision about their embryos and finding a second or third family for them. The adoptive parents’ children may have genetic siblings in two or three different families. How will adoptive parents discuss their decision with their child or children? Will the adoptive parents choose to have a relationship with the second or third adoptive family? We know that circumstances arise which prevent the adoptive couple from thawing and transferring all of the embryos, such as a hysterectomy, advanced age, or risk of carrying another pregnancy. Decisions should be based on the needs of the children, born and unborn. If it is determined by the adoptive family that the needs of the children, born and unborn, would be best met by replacing the embryos, it is important that they realize the impact this decision has on everyone involved.

   • It is important to discuss the financial aspect of embryo adoption with the adoptive couple. Do they have the finances to pay for one transfer? Two? Three? Make sure they are realistic. If they know they can only afford one transfer, then they should not adopt a large number of embryos, but should opt for a smaller number. Again, it is important that they thaw and transfer all the embryos they adopt if at all possible and not go back on their commitment to adopt them and be their “forever family.”
Every person starts out as an Embryo.

An embryo is made from a man and a woman. The man provides a part called a sperm. The woman provides a part called an egg (ovum). When a sperm and an egg (ovum) come together they make an embryo. This is called conception.

An embryo is like a seed. It needs a place to grow. When it grows, it grows into a baby! God puts each person together in His perfect way.

Mommy started out as an embryo. Daddy started out as an embryo. And YOU started out as an embryo. God grew all of us into the people we are today.

You were made (conceived) on Date of conception in a hospital called Name of clinic.

You were one of _________ embryos made (conceived) that day.

Dr. ____________ put the egg and the sperm together to make you.

When it’s time for the embryo to grow, the doctor puts the embryo into a woman. The place inside the woman where the embryo grows is called a uterus. Inside her body, the uterus is right below her tummy. This is the embryo’s home while it grows into a baby.
Remember the family who wanted a baby? When their embryos were made, the doctor put some inside the mommy and one of them (or two, or three) began to grow! She was pregnant with a baby!

Not all the embryos were put inside the mommy. You were one of those embryos! What happened to them?

While you were an embryo, you stayed at the hospital. Embryos are so tiny, it’s not safe for them to go home. They have to stay in the hospital with the doctors and nurses. The doctor who cared for you in the hospital and made sure you were safe was named ______________________ (fill in the embryologist if you know his/her name) He/she took care of you in the hospital before we adopted you!

While you were an embryo, Mommy and Daddy wanted to have a baby so much! We prayed that God would bring us a child. We prayed for you before we even knew you!

The mommy and daddy had a baby girl! (or boy!) S/he was cute and cuddly, and ate, slept, and played, just like a baby should!
The mommy and daddy remembered how much they wanted this baby, and they knew there were other mommies and daddies who also wanted a baby, but needed help. They had a family now and were very happy. They decided to give the embryos that were still in the hospital to us!

We adopted you, fill in your child’s name, as an embryo! The Fed Ex delivery man picked you up from the hospital where you had been staying, and brought you to mommy and daddy’s hospital called fill in name of your fertility clinic.

Mommy went to the hospital and the doctor put you inside my uterus. You started to grow!

Mommy and Daddy were very excited that you were growing. Not every embryo grows into a baby. Sometimes God takes the embryos to heaven to live with Him. He always knows who is going to live on earth and who is going to live in heaven. We’re so glad you’re on earth with us!

While you were growing... (talk about your pregnancy)... cravings...what the baby did...

One day, you decided it was time to be born! (talk about your labor, trip to the hospital, etc.)

It is my hope to give you a framework to help you tell your child the story of his or her embryo adoption. I encourage you to fill in details, such as why you felt God calling you to embryo adoption, or why you knew this was the right match for your family. Anything that lets your child know he or she was meant to be in your family, and was planned for. The truth is important. If you have any suggestions for the outline, I am open to them.

To add pictures, go to www.google.com. Click on ‘images’ and type in the image you want to find. Print out the picture and put it in your child’s Life Book.

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THE STORY OF ME

1. The story of me. Picture of child.

2. A long time ago, our family was just mommy and daddy. We wanted a baby so much to love and take care of while he grew up. But, we couldn’t start a baby, even with the help of very smart doctors. Picture of mom and dad before any kids.

3. At that same time, there was a mommy and daddy far away from us who couldn’t grow a baby big and strong. They had started very tiny babies like the seeds to a flower. They were searching for a mommy and daddy who could grow their babies and love them. Picture of genetic family. (Begin talking about how you are your child’s “forever” mommy and daddy and his genetic parents were his first family. Add discussions of flowers starting as seeds and babies starting as “baby seeds” called embryos. Flower seeds don’t look like flowers and embryos don’t look like babies.)

4. We decided to adopt a baby so we met with a social worker who told us how there were the tiniest babies needing a mommy and daddy. She called them Snowflakes because just like the flakes of snow each one is delicate and unique. Picture of child’s embryo. (We’ve discussed what a “social worker” is and how she helps mommies and daddies adopt. Children will usually want to talk more about how that is their picture when they were a baby seed.)

5. After our meeting, Daddy just knew that our Snowflake babies were waiting for us somewhere. Mommy knew too but she just needed to talk about it for a while first. Right away, we started all of our paperwork to adopt Snowflake babies. It took about __ months and while we waited we dreamed about our baby. Picture of the social worker.

6. One day as we left to go shopping and out to lunch, we opened the mail. There was an envelope from the adoption agency with “genetic parents’ names” pictures. They had chosen us to adopt their tiniest babies. We knew then that our babies had found their way home. Pictures of Nightlight building/office.

7. Soon we found out that you were growing in mommy’s belly.

8. We were so excited to watch mommy’s belly growing bigger…and bigger…and bigger. Pictures of belly from each trimester.

9. When you were born, your sweet cry was the best sound that we had ever heard. Mommy cried happy tears while Daddy took lots of pictures and was so, so proud. Child’s first picture.

10. We could hardly wait to have you home to ourselves because we had waited so long for you.

11. That’s how you joined our family. Picture of whole family.
HOW TO TALK WITH KIDS ABOUT THEIR
UNIQUE CONCEPTION

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The single biggest concern of individuals pursuing parenthood through donor conception, surrogacy, or adoption continues to be that of the impact on the children. Parents want to know how and when to talk to their children about their genetic origins.

The best interests of children and their families are served by children growing up with the knowledge that they are not genetically or gestationally related to one of their parents. Some reasons for this include:

- Secrets in families are damaging
- Adoption has taught us a great deal about how children feel in families where there are genetic secrets
- Children often “sense” there is a secret; sense there is “something wrong”
- Children who “sense” there is something wrong in their family usually assume it is about them and assume the worst
- Secrets almost never stay secrets forever
- When secret information finally comes out, the feeling of betrayal can be overwhelming
- Feelings of betrayal in families often lead to issues of trust

The first step in addressing the disclosure issue is for parents to examine their own feelings about the donor conception. Did the couple agree on the path to take to parenthood? Did they grieve the loss of the child they thought they were going to parent? Parents can get a feel for their comfort level about how their children came into their lives by asking themselves how it feels to imagine talking to their kids about it. These conversations involve the acknowledgment that there is another “family” in the world that is connected to their child in a unique way; but mom and dad are connected to the child in a way that no one else ever will be. Some feelings of being threatened by this are normal, particularly before infertility is resolved and before parents are comfortable with using a donor. As the infertile partner comes to terms with their own infertility and grieves the loss of the genetic child they will not have, they will feel more empowered, indeed entitled, to be the parent of a child whose “blood” they do not share.

HOW YOUNG CHILDREN THINK

Children are naturally curious about everything. A child of average intellect will want to ask questions about anything that comes into her head. “Where did the first tree
come from?" "Where does the sun go when it's nighttime?" The degree to which those questions will be raised will depend on the responses he gets from parents and the atmosphere created by parents to encourage children's inquiries. Most parents would think their children so smart to wonder aloud about how high is up. But should the question arise about their birth story, or why they do not look like daddy or sister, a parent's discomfort may quickly inform the child that it is not a subject open for discussion. To the child there may be no difference between asking questions about their natural environment and how they came into the world. As parents' feelings about infertility and reproductive technology come into play, parent's reactions may quickly tell the child that some questions are okay and some are not. The inference they draw from the message not to ask those questions could be damaging to the way in which the child perceives their entrance into the life of mom and dad.

WHEN AND HOW TO TALK WITH KIDS

To understand how to talk to children about conception, we might first look at how children think. While they often sound like miniature adults, they think differently from adults. Our best efforts at explanations may be thwarted by the limitations of their developmental stage. Anne Bernstein, in Flight of the Stork, gives two examples of how children understand where babies come from:

Three-year-old Alan: "If Daddy put his egg in you, then I must be a chicken."
Susan, age three: "To get a baby, go to the store and buy a duck."

Parents can begin talking to children about their conceptions the minute the child enters their lives or before. This may be during a pregnancy, at birth, or in the case of adoption, sometime after birth. It is not conception parents need to communicate about as much as the unique path by which that child has entered the parents' life. Thus, the intent is for parents to begin to practice talking about the presence of the other people in that child's life to whom they may be genetically related. Parents may want to tell their children how glad they are that the "helper" gave what was needed so this child could be in their life. Children may be told they have the "Sally's hands, the surrogate's beautiful green eyes, or their birthmother's toes. They may say how grateful the parents are to the doctor (and helper, surrogate, birthmother, etc.) who made it all possible and how precious the children are to mom and dad.

Books can be an extremely useful tool for introducing the subject of conception and birth, especially books written specifically about adoption or how babies are born. There are also many children's books in which the subtler theme is adoption or blended families or the way babies become part of families.

When parents reflect on the feelings that arise after talking with kids about conception or after reading certain books, they gain insight into the feelings they have about their path to parenthood. Does the language seem too awkward? Do they feel

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Bernstein, Anne; Flight of the Stork; Perspectives Press, 1994

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threatened by mentioning the third party involved in the child's conception? The pre-verbal months provide a perfect opportunity to practice ways to talk to their kids about their conceptions. Children will pick up on the non-verbal, the touch, the affect, or the giggle. One new mom by adoption shared with me that while feeding her infant daughter one morning, she asked her: "So, how do you like being adopted so far?" She was practicing, normalizing language not used in daily parlance, playing with words she knew were awkward, but taking advantage of her daughter's infancy to work her way into the kind of casual conversation about adoption (gamete donation, etc.) that would eventually be repartee in their home.

WHAT TO SAY

Parents should always speak the truth, but not necessarily the whole truth every time. They should use accurate, positive language. Babies are made from sperm and ova, not seeds and eggs. Babies grow in a uterus, not a tummy or a stomach or a belly. Couples are infertile for many reasons, not because mommy's tummy was broken and the doctor couldn't fix it. Eggs are something you scramble for breakfast in the morning. A stomach is someplace food goes. A funny story illustrates the importance of differentiating body parts. A pregnant woman was having dinner one night with her three-year-old son. The son had tears streaming down his face. "Honey, what's the matter?" she asked him with concern. Through his tears he replied: "I feel so sorry for that poor little baby in there with all that food plumping on its head." Despite my belief in the value of using accurate language, my own son, conceived through ovum donation, recently told me that the story he best understood were those his dad used in a car analogy to explain his conception: people are like cars. They need all their parts to run. We were missing a part needed to make a baby.

Whether through adoption, surrogacy, gestational carrier, or gamete donation, children should ideally start hearing the words related to their conceptions and births by the time they are three years old. The reason for telling a child about how they joined your family is not because they need to know the technical details of how in vitro fertilization or inseminations were actually performed; it is because children need to begin the process of acknowledging that there is another person or people in the world to whom they are connected in a significant and lasting way. It is normal for children to fantasize about the pieces of the puzzle that may not be filled in for many years; this is not sufficient reason to delay talking to them even though they may not yet fully understand. To tell a child of age nine or ten, essentially pre-adolescence, that they are not related to or connected to their mother or father in the way that their friends or other family members are related to their parents would be a tremendous shock, indeed perhaps perceived as a betrayal. Speaking about third party reproduction casually, early, and often normalizes it. It makes the information simply a part of the family story.

Children hear words all the time they do not completely understand. They want to know how they can hear grandma's voice on the other end of the telephone. We can explain to them what we understand about sound being carried through wires. They can hear sound and see wires but that is as abstract a concept as a microscopic sperm and
ovum meeting, growing inside a place we cannot see and ending up being the baby they once were. My son was told there was a part of my body that did not work. Eventually part of the telling became the labeling. The part of my body that did not work was called my ovaries. My ovaries did not make the thing I needed to make a baby. That thing I needed is called an ovum; another woman gave me her ovum so that he could grow inside me and be my son.

Children need an environment in which they can feel safe to blurt out their questions and thoughts. This can provide parents the opportunities to clarify misconceptions, build upon prior knowledge and gradually increase understanding. This will happen when parents bring children into their lives with pride, not shame, and resolution, not unhealed wounds. In an open, sharing atmosphere, this weighty subject need not be a burden to children but part of the multi-faceted journey of childhood and parenting. Sometimes the children will follow our lead. Sometimes the children are our guides. When we listen to the questions they ask, the path becomes clearer.

Carole LieberWilkins is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in Los Angeles, CA, specializing in reproductive medicine and family building options. She is a founding member of Resolve of Greater Los Angeles, having served on the Board of Directors for 14 years. Carole has lectured widely to professional and non-professional audiences on a variety of infertility subjects, but is perhaps best recognized for her work in talking to kids about unique conceptions. She is the mother of two sons, one through adoption and one through ovum donation. They are her consultants and advisors and claim they are the true experts in this subject.

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The following is an excerpt from Harrier Lerner’s book, The Mother Dance: How Children Change Your Life:

I have just read Harrier Lerner’s new book, “The Mother Dance: How Children Change Your Life”, and while this book is NOT about infertiltiy or parenting after third-party reproduction, I found a passage about kids and secrets relevant to the discussions we often have about telling children about their donor origins.
Sherry Franz, MSW
(Infertility Counsellor
Parent of 2 children through donor insemination)

"Kids do best when family members can talk openly together about things that matter. For starters, there is the issue of trust. Our children start out in the world assuming that we will not intentionally lie to them or deliberately conceal information about things that affect them...Children start out expecting straight answers, or at least to be told that some things are private and won't be shared or discussed with them. If our kids can't trust us to tell them the truth about issues that affect them, they have difficulty trusting the universe, including their internal universe of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.

It's also important to keep in mind that kids have a remarkable capacity to handle difficult facts. They do less well with the falsification, mystification, or silencing of their reality. Kids are also the most dependent family members and, as such, are fiercely loyal to unspoken family rules about communication. If there's an implicit 'don't ask, don't tell' rule surrounding a particular issue, kids catch on. They 'know' at a deep, automatic level what not to ask about and what not to tell....

When an important emotional issue can't be talked about, kids may develop school problems or begin to act out in outrageous ways. This is because parents can hide painful facts from kids, but they can't hide the emotionality surrounding the facts...When kids sense undercurrents in the family, such as a shift into anxiety, distance, or hostility, they may flounder in anxious fantasies or create self-blaming beliefs that can't be corrected until the facts are out on the table."

Let the Offspring Speak: Letters

Bill Cordray, who refers to himself as a "DI Adoptee", asked others conceived through donor insemination about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings related to DI. Following are excerpts from their letters.

"My mother told me and my brother that we were the products of artificial insemination when we were about ten and eight, respectively...I don't remember being either particularly shocked or surprised at this revelation. Perhaps I already knew it on some level....As I enter the middle of my life - I'm now 36 - I wonder about what it means for me...Perhaps it is difficult for people who have not come into the world this way to understand exactly what my feelings are: they may feel that a parent who has been present since birth is essentially the same as a biological parent. The more I learn about genetics, however, the more I recognize that heredity determines some important part of character...I would like to know what the missing fifty percent of my gene pool is like. I would, of course, also like to know whether there are hereditary illnesses to which I am prone. And on some level, most of all, I would like to meet an older man who looks like me.

I believe that we, the offspring, should have the right to know. Often, I imagine, following up on the information may lead to disappointment: we all create family romances, and the truth of our lives may be less rosy than we imagine. But truth has great power. Donating sperm is not the same as donating a pint of blood or even an organ, since the latter two form part of a person already in existence, whereas the former brings the person into being...I believe that wanting to know who my father is is not a great deal to ask." P.A.

"I found out [that I was conceived through DI] on my 28th birthday. I reacted with disbelief, but I was also relieved to find out the truth. I always thought I was adopted. My life had never made any sense up to that point. I also felt betrayed and lied to by my parents, but they were told by the doctor to never tell me...Would it have been better to have found out earlier? Absolutely. Honesty never hurts. Especially in the development from a child to an adolescent to a young man. I would have tried harder to find a niche in life. I would have known and understood myself better, and I would have had a greater appreciation for my father and what he had to go through...This guy [the donor] has passed his genetic traits to me and my offspring for generations to come. I really don't care about who he was, but more about what he was. What are a parent's responsibility to a child conceived through donor insemination? To accept the truth. To tell their children the truth, thus upholding family values and ethics within the realm of human dignity. We must remember that fear is the great enemy of truth...I feel that a child should be told anywhere between the ages of five and twelve...Both parents should be present to share this special story of conception with their special child." G.W.
"Last year my father died. Three days later, my mother told my sister and me that 'Your father may not be your real father'. She explained that he had a low sperm count and that they were unable to achieve a pregnancy with only his sperm. So they mixed his sperm with anonymous donor sperm. She believes the sperm donor is my biological father. She had wanted to tell us this since we were teenagers, but my dad made her promise not to tell.

At first it was a relief to hear this information. It explained a lot of confusing feelings and interactions in the family. Since then, my feelings have been very intense. I have felt intense rage at my father for not wanting to tell us about our roots. I feel that he used me for 35 years to cover up his infertility. I try to understand that he comes form a different generation which did not talk about such matters. Yet it hurts me deeply that he wasn't able to overcome that and talk to us about it later on.

...The intention of the secrecy was to make him believe he was our true father. In fact, the result was that we were painfully distant, and my sister and I struggled emotionally because we didn't understand why. I think that if we had been able to know the truth and talk to him about it, we might have felt closer, rather than being so baffled.

I have been experiencing some depression lately and have recently started seeing a social worker to help me sort out all of the issues. I know a big part of my feelings now have to do with grieving for the loss of two fathers (the death of my social father and not being able to know the identity of my biological father) grieving for unknown siblings, and also the fact that my relationship with my mother is changing as a result of this new information. My anger at my parents isn't because they did the donor inseminations. My anger is because I was lied to for 35 years about such vital information about myself...I am angry because I don't know my family medical history. This could affect my health care and lifespan in the future. I am angry because I don't know who my father is - what kind of a person he is, what are his interests and talents, his looks, his ethnic and religious background, etc.

...I certainly understand the desire to have children, and feel that DI shouldn't be stopped altogether. But I think the rights and feelings of the parties involved need to be reconsidered. Secrecy leads to strained relationships in families and traumatic tellings of the secret. I believe knowledge of the means of their conception is a right of every individual...We turn out to be real people, and have feelings too. We strongly desire to know our roots, so that we can complete our sense of identity." L.S.

"I was 33 and about two months pregnant with my second child when I learned that I was a donor offspring...my terminally ill godmother told me what I had figured was a wild tale about my mother having me through 'artificial insemination'. I hadn't wanted to believe it. My mother had been outraged at the notion. My godmother persisted, on grounds that I should now the truth, and my oldest brother finally corroborated her story...I was at once shocked, and strangely, relieved. I grieved to learn that my beloved dad was not my biological father. I felt utterly betrayed that my mother
had failed to come clean when my godmother first revealed the secret...My mother wishes the whole DI business would go away. She feels intense loyalty to my dad. She is very upset that I would like information about the donor. My mother says that the DI 'was nobody's business but mine and my husband's'.

...Before conception even occurs, people who intend to use DI should plan to tell their child. I wish my parents' attitude about it had been health enough that they could have spared me the anguish of having it sprung on me by a third party. I am sure that the 'secret' would have surfaced eventually, because it turns out that most of my extended family had known about it from the very start. I cannot adequately describe how it feels to discover that everyone except me had known.

...I think it is preposterous that anyone would expect me not to wonder about and want to know who this man [the donor] is. Further, I wonder about and want to know who my other relatives and ancestors are. There's nothing new or obsessive about this curiosity - I've always wanted to know these things about my family and had thought, in fact, that I did know them. This does NOT mean that I desire a personal relationship with the donor or his family members...I do not imagine or wish for a 'replacement' father. I do not want any material goods from my donor father nor do I fantasize about socializing with him and his family. My curiosity is mainly genealogical in nature; a 'family tree' project.

DI parents must plan before conception that they will tell their child. The child's true biological and genealogical legacy is his or hers alone. It is not the 'private business' of the parents. I firmly believe that parental desire to keep DI secret stems in large part from the fear that the child will think less of or reject the social father. I think the advice given today for adoptive parents would apply, which is that children be told as early as possible. The parents should tell the child, together. Parents of adult DI offspring cannot count on the secret dying with them. There is substantial risk that they will find out from a family member or friend, after it is too late to get any answers from the mom or dad who raised them. I hope that DI parents will find the courage to shield their offspring from learning their birth secret under needlessly shattering circumstances." M.W.L.

"I was 15 [when I was told about the DI]. I was kind of delighted at the time because my parents were getting divorced and my father had left a seemingly picture-perfect family without any notice. He was beginning to look pretty evil to us and at that time I was happy to know that I wasn't actually physically related to him.

...It is hard to say how much I was affected [by the secrecy]. Definitely there is a big history of secrecy in our family. This is just one more thing." M.K.

"I was 23 or 24 years old when my mother informed me that my existence was to be partially credited to a man whose identity was unknown to her...When she informed me that 'my father was not my father', that my biological father was an unknown sperm donor, I was not shocked by the news...I had never felt connected with my social father.
In fact, at times I would look at him and think to myself when he had done something that seemed to me to be rather childish, "this person's genes contributed to my being?" We were very much opposites...I had up to the point of being told this news attributed this lack of connectivity to my parents' divorce when I was eight or so. The fact that my DNA was in no way tied to his resolved these discrepancies more clearly for me. Moreover, I found it rather exciting that my biological father had very likely been a Harvard med school student...I began to wonder who he was, what kind of person he was, what had I inherited from him?

...Although I don't feel that the secrecy which existed regarding the circumstances of my birth did ME any emotional or psychological harm, I can see where it could be harmful to another child depending upon the circumstances. I think children in general are very perceptive and can sense when something is not quite as it appears. I think it is the parents' duty to never MISLEAD a child regarding the circumstances of his/her birth, and to ultimately make it clear to the child at some point exactly what the circumstances were.

...If I could obtain my biological father's medical background and other information about him pertaining to his character, interests, etc., I would be satisfied. I do not need to know his name and address, but the medical information may prove critical in my later years, and the personal information may provide me some insight into my character and personality." E.C.

"I was 21 years old when I found out in a telephone conversation with my mother. In response, I was first angry. I was bitter at my mother for being so secretive and cheating me out of a 'past'. However, in the long run, I respect her choice to have DI. I feel as soon as children can understand how babies are made, they should be told. They should be told that they were created and raised out of love from the parents that are raising them - but should have access when they are 18 to their biological father's 'make-up'.

When a family lives in secrecy, it breeds dysfunction - an open, loving communication can do nothing but bring a family closer together. I feel that I did experience genealogical bewilderment because I neither look nor act like my mother, I also harboured a lot of anger towards my mother for keeping who I was from me. To this day our relationship still struggles because of my lack of trust in her. I feel that she is the one who created the distance - and now I'm not comfortable with the idea of getting any closer." A.
PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

POSITIVE REFLECTIONS: GROWING UP AS A D.I. CHILD
Karen Topp

Karen Topp is the first child of Clarke and Ellie Topp who discovered nearly 30 years ago that they could not have children, and so decided to try the then unusual method of donor insemination. This technique was offered in the U.S. where Clarke and Ellie were in graduate school, but they returned to Canada in time for Karen to be born in Ottawa, where she spent her first 19 years. After receiving a B.Sc. at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Karen decided to pursue a Ph.D. in experimental physics at Cornell, where she has spent the last four years. Karen, now 27, and two decades older than most children conceived by donor insemination, shares her thoughts and feelings on being born of this reproductive technique, and on whether this has in any way affected her as an adult.

My parents are great. They didn't make a big deal about how or when to tell me about my origins — there was no big session where they sat me down and told me I was different. Instead, their method seemed to be simply to wait until I asked questions and then tell me the whole truth. What could be more natural? Luckily for them, I was an inquisitive kid, but I believe it was my parents' forthright but casual attitude that made this completely non-issue for me.

I distinctly remember the first time I asked my mother where I came from. I was about five years old. She answered (making use of the fact that our family did a lot of gardening) that normally the daddy plants a seed in the mommy's stomach where it grows into a baby, but in our case, Daddy was out of seeds so we had to borrow some from somebody else. Well, that must have satisfied me at the time, since I don't remember asking any more details then. (I recall wandering off to think about how a seed would fit into a bellybutton which, at that time, was the obvious entrance to my mother's stomach...)

In fact, I don't remember thinking about it again until I was in grade 5, when we girls got the "menstruation talk" at school. (What do they do with the boys during these things?) As the teacher told us that our bodies would soon be preparing to have children, I remember thinking that somehow I was special in this regard. I don't recall between ages 5 and 10 discussing my birth with my parents, but we must have, because I felt in that classroom that I had always known. So then I asked my parents lots of details — did they know the donor, did they know what he looked like ("no" and "no"), where did this happen, how did the doctor do it, how did they know Dad couldn't have kids, what did a sperm count mean, could I find the donor, and so on. My parents were forthcoming and matter-of-fact. I remember thinking that I would just like to see a picture of the donor, to see if I looked like him (my scientific curiosity already in place), but I certainly didn't obsess about finding him. I also remember thinking that it was pretty cool that I wasn't conceived like everybody else. Unlike the outward show of uniformity and normality necessary in a school playground (like the right brand of jeans), I knew this was something different and even special about me that I could keep inside and share or hide as I wished. Instinctively, I guess, I didn't talk much about it, since it fell under the same taboo category as thinking about your parents having sex.

I do remember, however, a sleep-over party towards the end of grade 5 where I did tell about a half dozen or so of my best friends. Of course, boys were the number one topic after the lights went out, and maybe because I had no exploits with boys to report, I decided to tell them about my father having a zero
sperm count and my being the result of another man's sperm being injected into my Mom. Well they thought that was "neat-o", and they asked me a few questions, but either it wasn't a big enough deal for them to remember through the excitement of the sleep-over, or I had basically thoughtful friends, because they never mentioned it again. If they told anyone else, the news never got back to me.

During my teens, I guess there were a few times when I had a healthy curiosity about who the donor was (and is...), but I wouldn't dream of calling anyone but my Dad my "real" father. I love my parents both dearly, but in many ways I am closer to my father. He and I share the same bizarre sense of humour, the same scientific curiosity, and we both interact with people in similar ways — open and direct, but gently fun-loving. The donor was just some stranger (probably a financially strapped grad student). Maybe I would be more interested in him if there were any way to find him, but I gather at that time no records were kept at all. The donor was supposedly screened for hereditary diseases, and they picked one with my Dad's hair colour, but nothing else is known. If he were easy to find, I might be curious to meet him, but I can't see myself putting any effort into arranging such a meeting, and I don't feel any psychological "loss" for not knowing the source of half of my chromosomes. In a way, I actually had an advantage over some friends at school who joked about being their parents' "accident" (for example, one friend was born 6 months after her parents' wedding, and another was considerably younger than the sibling his parents had intended to be their last.) I know my parents wanted me very much.

As an older teenager, I don't recall ever thinking about the donor or my father's infertility. My life was pretty busy and exciting in late high school and into university. So when my parents phoned me in my third year at Queen's to ask if I were willing to speak to an Ottawa infertility support group with them, I was surprised — mostly because I hadn't thought about it in so long, but also because I didn't know what on earth I would have to say, other than "No, this hasn't affected me." As an example of my father's openness, he actually volunteered the information about himself, and then agreed to speak to this group when he heard from a friend and co-worker that she was involved with it. At that meeting, people seemed interested in how and when my parents told me, whether I felt psychologically damaged by being "different" (no) and if I thought much about the donor (no). Mostly they were fascinated that my parents were so open about the whole topic. Yes, they had told the family and close friends (and obviously me), but they didn't offer the information to broader circles unless their story might help others in situations similar to the one they found themselves in nearly three decades ago.

Through this meeting, it became known that my parents and I were quite willing to discuss the circumstances of my birth, and in the last few years we have been asked to speak at an infertility conference (where I felt a little like Exhibit A), and have been interviewed for a TVOntario special. I have had to think about the "issue" of my birth more in the last couple of years than I did in the previous ten years put together. Although I don't mind, it is a bit weird to be asked questions about who I am, instead of what I've become or accomplished. Oh well — it's also flattering to publish an article about myself.

Even though my parents and I are not shy when asked to share our story, my brother and sister are not very comfortable with our openness. This, I have learned, is probably the more typical attitude toward issues of reproduction and infertility. They are two and five years younger than I, and both adopted — not because my parents wouldn't have used donor insemination again, but because at that time there were many infants in the adoption agency who needed homes, and DI wasn't readily available in Ottawa. They are in every respect my siblings and equals, and my parents respect their wishes as much as mine. Since secrecy is not part of our lifestyle, however, they understand that our sharing might be helpful to others.

The most amusing thing I've been asked is about my sexuality. As with the rest of my life, I think I'm honest and straightforward with my feelings and desires. (My boyfriend of three years, as he looks over my shoulder, agrees...) Incidentally, this is not a function of my parents' openness. I would say they're as uncomfortable as anyone of their gener-
tion in talking about sex. I learned about the birds and bees through some well-taught public school health classes, and from a book called The Facts of Love which my mother gave me when I started menstruating. My openness is most likely due to a reasonable degree of self-confidence and some university buddies who were easy to talk to.

Anyway, now that I'm at the age where many of my friends are having children, I've been thinking more about eventually having my own family. I would like to be a mother, and if I should find myself or my partner unable to have children, I think I would be receptive to whatever technology were available to us at the time. I certainly would have no problem with DI! And yes, I would be completely honest with my children as well. I realize with a method like this that it's quite possible to keep the whole thing a secret. But, on the rare chance that my grown child would find out on his/her own that I had lied, I'm sure the repercussions would be infinitely more harmful than telling the truth from the beginning. (For the mathematically minded, I'm saying "infinite" because I believe we're dividing by the zero repercussion of continual honesty.) Can you imagine finding out, now that you're an adult, that your mother or father is not your biological parent?

I'm not sure what to say in summary, other than I hope my rambling here has been helpful. I'm normal. I'm relatively happy and well-adjusted (for a grad student...) And, if I hadn't written this article, DI would be the furthest thing from my mind. After all, how often do most people think about their birth?
Sharing our donor's origins with our children: Irene's story

We are in the beginning stages of sharing our children's donor origins with them, and I'll share our experiences with you up to this point. Our children's ages are six years (next month), four years and 18 months. We did start off by telling about their donor with them when they were preverbal, mostly to help us become comfortable with the words and actually saying them. Let's face it this is fairly unique territory, and there isn't exactly a large selection of how to books on the topic of talking with your children about their donor origins! We don't have the amount of resources available to us like adoption for instance, and although there are a few books, hopefully there will be many more in the near future.

We started reading a couple of the children's books on DJ to our two oldest when they were around two to two and a half years old. But they didn't really ask questions or show any interest. So when we were expecting our third child we used that opportunity to talk about how babies were made and used the DJ books as well. There was more interest in how the actual baby was made and growing in my tummy. The kids would pull out the books & ask us to read them, but at this time the book they really liked was called *Beng Barna* by Sheila Kitzinger with photographs by Lennart Nilsson. The book has awesome pictures and simple text about how babies are made and grow. I would highly recommend this book.

*The first conversation!*  
When our youngest was about four months old the kids wanted to read the DJ books one evening, and we actually had one of our first conversations about DJ and their donor. I had posted this to the group at that time, but the gist was that they were curious about what he looked like, asked if I had any pictures of him, and my daughter wanted to tell him that she loved him because he helped us have our baby. It was a very special moment for us.

Since then the kids pull out the books every once in while, and we've let them take the lead pretty much in bringing the topic up. Several weeks ago our oldest surprised me when he brought up some of the conversations that we had about DJ and their donor from a year earlier. They do remember!

*Asking questions*  
Lately our daughter has been asking more questions about the donor and she's really into a curiosity about babies. She plays with her dolls, sticks them under her shirt and says she's going to have one. She wants to be a mummy and have babies when she's grown up! She also pretends to breast feed her dolls (I'm still nursing our youngest), and has been wanting to read the DJ books more than her older brothers. The other day she absolutely floored me when I was reading *My Story* (the simple book on DJ for the three to seven-year-old group), and when we were at the page with the picture of the three donors sitting on chairs she asked me: "Mummy, I have a question. Why do the sperm donors give away their sperm to make a baby? Don't they want to keep it to make children with their own wives if they have them?" This is from a four-year-old! So we talked about how some donors may not have families and their own children yet, but that they want to help other mummies and daddies like us have children. And then she said: "And make their dreams come true!" She must have remembered this comment from one of her books, or Disney tapes...She's a very mature four-year-old at times.

So for us the books that we are presently using, *My Story* and *Mummy Did I grow in your Tummy*, have been helpful. A few weeks ago they were playing doctor, and when I went in to check on them, my daughter's bunny was lying on the bed and she pronounced that the bunny was going to have a baby. She held up a plastic toy egg and a hooded necklace that she called the sperm from the donor, and on they played. I don't want to keep it to make children with their own wives if they have them?" This is from a four-year-old! So we talked about how some donors may not have families and their own children yet, but that they want to help other mummies and daddies like us have children. And then she said: "And make their dreams come true!" She must have remembered this comment from one of her books, or Disney tapes...She's a very mature four-year-old at times.

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I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. We're talking about privacy issues with the kids now too. Keeping their private body parts covered except from their parents or doctor's if they are having a check up, you don't go running around showing them to everyone, and hope to talk a bit about private family information and use their DJ origins as an example. I'm not sure how that will go, but I don't want to give them the impression that to talk about DJ is negative, just that it's not something we talk about to everyone.

*Comfortable terminology*  
The other thing I'd like to mention is the issue of comfortable terminology. This is a tough one, as we all have different comfort levels, and our own personal feelings as to what a name meant to us. We are using donor, or sperm donor for our family, and it's OK for now. Because we use Dad, Daddy and father for the relationships that a parent has with their child, as well as their teacher, friends and so on. Father would not be a choice I would be comfortable with for our family. Perhaps donor father would be more comfortable when they are older. I don't know, and I know that this is something we'll be talking about with them as we grow together as a family.

You never do know what kids are going to say...Our son was eating broccoli and pulling apart the florets, when he commented on how the tiny pieces looked just like sperm! We look forward to more comments & continued conversations with our kids. As well to the stories that this group would like to share with the rest of us.

Best of luck to everyone as they find what is comfortable for their own families!

Irene
DC, friends and family – telling them and how they feel

How DC parents Karen and Robert Farr told their friends and family – and how friends and family felt about their news.

At a recent DC network meeting Robert and I met a couple who were considering donor conception treatment. They had not yet discussed their situation with their friends and family and were anxious about who to tell, when to tell or whether to tell at all. They were very keen for us to share our experiences of telling others with them and Robert and I found ourselves transported back, as we told them our own personal story.

As a result of that conversation I thought it might be helpful if I asked Robert's parents and two of our closest friends to talk about their thoughts and feelings at the time we told them about Robert's infertility and our plans to consider donor conception.

Our Experience of Telling Others

It is now four years since we received our infertility diagnosis. We were fortunate in some respects that it did not take long for us to be referred to the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital for tests by our GP, after a short period of trying to conceive naturally.

The tests and biopsy confirmed that Robert, my husband, was infertile and we discovered that our only chance of having a baby in the future was through donor conception.

At this point in time we had taken two close friends and Robert's parents into our confidence about our fertility problems and the investigations at the hospital. Other friends simply knew we were having problems in that area, assuming that the fertility problems were with me (rather than Robert) and it seemed easier to leave it at that, rather than explain further.

When we were given the very last diagnosis of complete infertility, it seemed such a harsh and final fact that we felt unable to discuss it with anyone until we had a chance to fully understand and begin to come to terms with the implications of our situation.

It was then that telling friends and family became an issue for us and I remember numerous very helpful calls to Olivia at the Network, as we tried to wrestle with this important area. So many questions presented themselves.

My immediate need and instinct almost, was to talk about it to those people in my life who I trust, but because Robert didn't share this view, I held back. He felt that if we progressed to DC treatment and it was unsuccessful, there would be no point in anyone knowing. He was also concerned, as I was, about what other people's reactions might be, to being told this news.

We were anxious that people might react negatively towards us, or make some personal comment or joke to upset Robert. Our imaginations went into overtime thinking of all the ways we could become social outcasts!

Eventually we came to the conclusion that anyone close to us, who truly cared for us, would be supportive and trusting, and if there was anyone who wasn't, we would just have to accept that fact. We also came to the conclusion it was best to take things slowly.

So, fairly soon after hearing the news ourselves, we decided to tell Robert's parents. We talked to them together, very honestly and openly about what had happened and any initial anxieties we may have felt disappeared, as they showed their concern and care for our situation. It was a huge relief and we felt soothed and supported.

At about the same time I told a close girlfriend of mine, whose reaction again was overwhelmingly positive. I felt so relieved that I would now have someone to talk to apart from Robert, particularly whilst I was having the treatment.

Getting a little bit braver now, but still nervous, we told a couple who have been good friends for years who already had one child. We arranged to meet them separately on the same evening, as we felt that such an intimate conversation would be better on a one to one rather than with the four of us together. We openly discussed the implications of our situation for us and our families and also our own sadness and anxieties. Robert and I were delighted that our friends felt able to ask us questions about our plans (or lack of them at that point!) and also any aspects they found confusing or they wanted to know more about. It was a wonderfully frank discussion and was definitely a friendship affirming experience.

As time has gone on we've told more close friends and members of our immediate family. Particularly when I became pregnant through DC and eventually gave birth to our daughter Isabella (2 years ago), the need to tell more people increased – complete secrecy about her conception was never a considered option for us.

Undoubtedly for us, telling someone now is so much easier than it was in those early days and I am still so grateful to those whose positive kind words helped us along.

Reactions to the news continue to be positive, but I never get blase in the telling. We decided to tell a fairly new friend who we met through the National Childbirth classes and although I felt quite relaxed about telling her about Isabella's conception, I remembered the enormity of what I was saying.

We all have to find our own comfortable level of openness, but I hope like us, others will find that their worst nightmare never materialises, and in fact they end up having a positive experience of telling others.
A Friend’s Point of View

Good friends should be there through thick and thin!

When Karen and Robert told us they couldn’t have children, we were really sorry, especially as we had already experienced the joy of our first child. We wanted to know if there was anything they could do to become parents. They told us what the problems were and discussed the options open to them.

Over the coming months, as a friend who knows the decision to have a child, you share the roller coaster of emotions, the disappointment of menstruation for example and the hope after each hospital visit.

I was really pleased Karen had shared their decision with us, so that I could understand her different anxieties and moods. If I hadn’t known what was going on, I might not have been helpful or just felt confused.

When the news was of success, the joy brought more complications. Robert was really worrying about genetic ties and bonding and the relationships between the baby and other family members. My husband was able to discuss this and offer a more objective view, which helped.

Having gone to such lengths to become pregnant, all the injections and investigations and scans take on greater significance and again we shared in the debates, as they approached the birth and the labour.

After Isabella was born, I particularly remember Robert’s delight when all the nurses commented on how like him, Isabella looked.

Sometimes when a baby is born, the father can feel left out, a situation which could be heightened by sperm donation. However, after a post caesarian infection developed and Karen had to return to hospital for a prolonged stay, Robert found himself straight in at the deep end, looking after Isabella day and night. The amazing care and love that he bestowed on his pride and joy meant that there was no thought of "bonding issues" – they were together for always!

Perhaps all friends may not understand, but for us, we are really pleased Karen and Robert told us. Our delight in their sharing our experiences of parenthood – good and bad – increases our friendship through thick and thin.

A Mother’s Feelings on D.C.

When my son told me that he wouldn’t be able to father children, I felt so incredibly sorry for him. He is such a loving person and I always felt that one day he would be a wonderful, caring father.

It was flattering to feel that he and his wife could tell me about the problem and discuss with me the options open to them and when they told me about D.C. I was thrilled, this option seemed to me to be so much better than adoption because his wife would have the joy of being pregnant and be the natural mother to the baby.

They were very fortunate they didn’t have to wait too many months, although it must have seemed a long time to them and then success, they were to become parents. The pregnancy went well and my beautiful longed for baby granddaughter arrived.

My son bonded with her immediately and several people commented on how much she looked like her daddy. I must admit I searched her face looking for my son, knowing she wasn’t his, but it made no difference to how I felt about her. She is his daughter, she is my granddaughter and I love her very dearly and he is a wonderful caring father, as I always knew he would be.

A Father’s Feelings on D.C.

When I first heard that it was virtually impossible for my son to father children, I felt extremely sorry for him and his wife and started to think along the lines of adoption as a way of achieving the much wanted family which they both were desperate to have. This seemed to me quite acceptable, as they both would have an equal relationship to an adopted child.

When I heard that the chosen option was to go for D.C. I was worried for a time as it seemed that it could lead to an unequal relationship between Mother and Child and Father and Child but in the event this worry has been proved to be completely wrong. From the moment she was born all worries about relationships disappeared.

The relationship or bonding between them all is as strong if not stronger than I have seen in any conventional family.

As far as I am concerned, from the moment she was born she became my son’s daughter and my granddaughter who is loved as such.